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SIPDIS

DEPT FOR GEORGIA MONITORING GROUP AND EUR/CARC

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SUBJECT: GEORGIA: LACK OF ACCESS KEEPS HOTSPOTS HOT

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Classified By: CDA KENT LOGSDON FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

¶1. (C) Summary and comment. Georgia has so far avoided major provocations since Russian troops withdrew from most undisputed Georgian territory, but several potential sources of friction remain. Among them are Akhalgori; ongoing tension along the administrative boundaries of South Ossetia and Abkhazia; Perevi; and the ever-present rumor mill.

Increased EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM) activity has helped deter troublemakers, but the inability of the EUMM and the OSCE to enter South Ossetia reduces their ability to monitor events and encourage real restraint. UNOMIG is receiving less and less cooperation from de facto forces, thereby losing some of its ability to deter trouble. The Georgian side is publicizing what it sees as ongoing aggression in Akhalgori and elsewhere, leading to confused and sometimes inaccurate reporting, such as the late October 24 reports of 200 armed South Ossetians coming across the border -- a story that appears to be a misreporting of a botched carjacking in a border village of Didi Kurvaleti by 15-20 Ossetians. The Georgian press continues to cover Russian statements about the EUMM's inability to provide security, when contrasted with Russian intransigence in providing access north of the boundaries. A renewed push for EUMM and OSCE access to South Ossetia, and EUMM and unrestricted UNOMIG access to Abkhazia -- in order to ensure restraint on both sides of the boundaries -- must continue to be a priority for the U.S. and the EU. End summary and comment.

AKHALGORI

¶2. (SBU) International observers agree that Akhalgori remains a potential source of real difficulty. The Interior Ministry told post October 23 that Russian forces had sent 40 additional armored vehicles to Akhalgori, along with an unknown number of troops. The EUMM and OSCE were unable to confirm this information, but both observed that Russian forces had reinforced their southernmost checkpoint on the road to Akhalgori, just north of Odzisi. Local residents are still able to travel in and out of Akhalgori, but entry is restricted for anyone else. Press reports suggest the fee for non-residents to enter is 1,000 lari, although some say no one without residence can enter anymore. An Embassy staff member reports he is unable to visit his family's ancestral home in Akhalgori because he is not resident there. Recent press reports suggest ethnically Georgian young men in Akhalgori are now subject to Ossetian conscription, which would encourage them to abandon the town.

¶3. (SBU) The Russian motivation for retaining and apparently strengthening control over Akhalgori remains a subject of debate. Various Georgian officials have suggested the

primary interest is strategic, because access to the Akhalgori Valley provides access to the hills to the east, which overlook the A-301 north-south highway (the old Russian military highway) and potentially enable Russian forces to close off that artery. Another possible interest is political; no the valley lies within the South Ossetian administrative boundary, and Russia may want to help its de facto friends establish a firm claim to the entire territory.

EUMM officials have suggested the Russians may be holding Akhalgori as an eventual bargaining chip. One local commentator offered a more ominous spin on this interpretation, warning that Russia's intention was to use Akhalgori and other specific points of contention to tie up international negotiations and deflect them from more fundamental issues.

¶14. (C) The Georgians, meanwhile, may not be sitting idly by. On October 16 the EUMM reported to diplomatic colleagues that it had observed about 20 Georgian military forces (as opposed to Interior Ministry forces) north of Bazaleti, not far to the east of the Akhalgori Valley. On October 23, the EUMM reported observing construction between the villages of Bantsurtkari and Ananuri, also east of Akhalgori, of what it believes could be new barracks for the Georgian military (the EUMM has not been able to confirm the purpose of the construction). The presence of a mere platoon of soldiers or the construction of barracks by themselves might be innocuous, but the location so close to Akhalgori could raise tensions.

TROUBLESPOTS ALONG THE BOUNDARIES

¶15. (SBU) The administrative boundaries put residents of both undisputed Georgian territory and the breakaway regions, as well as their respective officials and law enforcement

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bodies, in close proximity. In many cases the boundaries lie along open fields, with no effective boundary control, and movement in both directions is easy, especially at night. The friction along these contact points has not yet erupted in renewed hostilities, but it could at any time. Although international monitors are not always able to make an authoritative determination of events, and in some cases disagree on what likely occurred, the following incidents reflect some of the sensitivities that any particular incident could ignite.

¶16. (SBU) One of the primary sensitivities is the presence of Georgian Interior Ministry personnel near the boundaries. From the Georgian perspective, the Interior Ministry presence is crucial to maintaining order and deterring attacks. For its part, the EUMM does not consider its mandate as providing security directly, but rather monitoring the provision of security by the appropriate agencies -- in particular, the Georgian Interior Ministry. The EUMM recently noted that some previously unmarked Interior Ministry vehicles now had "POLICE" (in English) written on the side, providing increased transparency (post personnel have observed some such vehicles near the boundary still without markings). The EUMM has also expressed its satisfaction that the Interior Ministry carries appropriately low-caliber weapons near the boundary. (Embassy Note: We will urge the EUMM to make more of these observations public in order to demonstrate that the Georgian side is not in violation of the ceasefire. End note.) The EUMM would like to provide the same monitoring of local law enforcement in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, but currently does not have the access or the contacts to do so.

¶17. (SBU) On October 21, a Georgian Interior Ministry vehicle was damaged by a mine near the village of Avlevi, southwest of Tskhinvali and northwest of Gori. One officer was slightly injured. The location of the attack was outside South Ossetia, but only about 500 meters from the boundary. The OSCE reported the mine was a Russian MON-50, an

anti-personnel device similar to a Claymore. The EUMM determined the explosion was detonated remotely by wire, meaning that those responsible were within several dozen meters of the vehicle when they detonated the device. The EUMM noted that traffic had traveled on the road in question throughout the day without incident, suggesting this one particular Interior Ministry vehicle was singled out as a target.

¶8. (SBU) The evening of October 17 and the morning of October 18, gunfire was reported on both sides of the administrative boundary just south of Tskhinvali, near Zemo Nikozi (outside South Ossetia) and Gujabauri (inside); no one was injured. The Georgian Interior Ministry claimed in both cases it was drunken soldiers firing into the air on the South Ossetian side; Russian forces claimed the October 18 shooting was aimed at a Russian checkpoint just inside South Ossetia. The EUMM and OSCE received conflicting reports and were unable to confirm either version. Russian forces informed the OSCE of the October 18 shooting shortly after it occurred, indicating they had been prepared to return fire, but refrained from doing so to give the OSCE a chance to investigate. Russian forces did not allow the OSCE across the boundary to conduct Qforces did not allow the OSCE across the boundary to conduct an investigation there, however.

¶9. (SBU) The morning of October 19, the town of Khurcha, north of the Enguri River but outside Abkhazia, came under attack; no one was injured. UNOMIG believes rockets hit the town, citing pictures of impacts that show greater damage than rifle- or machine gun-fire could produce; the EUMM has questioned whether rockets struck, suggesting some of the damage could have been from previous attacks. UNOMIG noted the presence of a Russian BMP-1 armored vehicle across the administrative boundary at the time, which carries a weapon that can shoot the projectile UNOMIG believes was fired (a SIG). Locals reported to the EUMM that the attack was caused by a local criminal dispute. A house hit in the attack, which UNOMIG believes to be the main target based on the number of impacts near the house, had recently been chosen as a local headquarters for the Georgian Interior Ministry.

THE PROBLEM WITH PEREVI

¶10. (SBU) Both EUMM and OSCE monitors agree the Russian checkpoint at Perevi is outside South Ossetia. (Although the EUMM would like to locate an authoritative map to confirm that finding, the best information it has at the moment -- a map from the Georgian Geographic Institute -- supports that conclusion.) The location of the checkpoint, at a fork in

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the road, allows Russian forces to control movement both into the village of Perevi (which is outside South Ossetia) and into South Ossetia. Although the Russian side officially contends the checkpoint is inside the boundary, Russian forces at the checkpoint itself conceded to the OSCE it is outside the boundary, but said there was no other suitable location for it -- presumably to control the movement on both roads. Moving the checkpoint into South Ossetia would prevent the Russians from controlling the road leading into Perevi, which loops back into South Ossetia after passing through the village.

¶11. (SBU) On October 20, the Russian checkpoint did not allow a World Food Program shipment of 12 tons of foodstuffs to pass into Perevi. Previous WFP shipments had successfully reached Perevi; it may have been the absence of the Russian commander from the checkpoint that led his deputy to block the delivery. French Foreign Minister Kouchner objected to the lack of access to Perevi in his remarks at the October 22 donors conference in Brussels, and the WFP successfully delivered the shipment October 24; the EUMM attributed the Russian change of heart to Kouchner's intervention.

¶12. (C) One potentially troubling element of the Perevi

situation is the EU's apparent hesitancy to press the point with the Russians. The EUMM has not yet committed to a final determination that the checkpoint is outside South Ossetia, although it has located fairly authoritative maps, and it is unlikely to find anything more authoritative. French Ambassador Eric Fournier suggested to the Charge that Kouchner did make the point firmly and publicly in Brussels, but in fact, the foreign minister's prepared comments (emailed to EUR/CARC) only objected to the lack of access to the village of Perevi, not the location of the Russian checkpoint. Finally, recent EU public statements (e.g., EU High Representative Solana's October 10 statement on the withdrawal of Russian forces and the EUMM's October 17 statement on unexploded ordnance) seem to suggest that Russia has complied with its obligations to withdraw from undisputed Georgian territory, not leaving the EU much room to object to the Russians' continued presence outside South Ossetia without revision of its previous public statements.

THE RUMOR MILL

¶13. (C) October 23 and 24 reports of the presence of increased Russian forces in South Ossetia in general, and Akhalgori in particular, have heightened fears of Russian intentions and possible provocations. An October 22 report in the press that women and children were evacuating Tskhinvali, which both de facto South Ossetian officials and the Georgian Interior Ministry refuted, also raised concerns.

The Interior Ministry reported to post that a story was circulating in South Ossetia that the Georgian side was planning to attack on November 1 in order to try to help Senator McCain in the U.S. presidential election. The evening of October 24, a breathless MOIA official reported that 200 armed South Ossetians were crossing into the Georgian village of Didi Kurvaleti; EUMM and OSCE monitors later clarified that 15-20 South Ossetians had crossed into the village and attempted to hijack a car. After failing, the Ossetians threatened to return. EUMM monitors remain on the scene.

INCREASING RESTRICTIONS ON MOVEMENTS IN ABKHAZIA QINCREASING RESTRICTIONS ON MOVEMENTS IN ABKHAZIA

¶14. (SBU) In recent days, access in and out of Abkhazia has become increasingly difficult. The morning of October 24, a pedestrian bridge along a railway bridge was blown up just north of Zugdidi, near Shamgona, destroying a basic link between Zugdidi and Gali. Another pedestrian bridge a few kilometers away was rendered impassable by an apparent rocket attack on October 19. The Russian checkpoint at Pakhulani began blocking all access into Abkhazia around October 21. UNOMIG patrols have heard numerous stories from locals that access into Abkhazia has become more difficult, more expensive, or no longer possible at certain crossing points. UNOMIG itself has experienced an increased amount of resistance from Abkhaz officials, who in some cases have not allowed UNOMIG patrols to pass and in other cases have either not spoken with the patrols or expressed keen disapproval with them. UNOMIG has experienced such fluctuations in cooperation before, and is therefore not ready to pronounce this recent friction a long-term trend, but notes that the level of cooperation does seem to have deteriorated in recent days.

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¶15. (SBU) UNOMIG also reports an increasing amount of excavation activity at Abkhaz and Russian checkpoints.

COMMENT: WE'RE MORE THAN HALF BLIND

¶16. (C) Much of the tension and mistrust currently threatening the administrative boundaries could be alleviated by access to the other side of the boundaries for the EUMM and the OSCE. Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov has been quoted in the press as blaming the EUMM for not doing enough

to provide security. To a large extent, this accusation stems from a fundamental disagreement between Russia and the EU about the nature of the EUMM. Although we may not be able to resolve that difference of opinion, one simple way for the Russians to enable the EUMM to do more to ensure security -- if that is in fact Russia's aim -- is to allow the mission to monitor both sides of the border. If Russia continues to refuse access to the EUMM, it will have difficulty arguing with a straight face that the diminished security along the boundaries is the EUMM's fault. The same logic applies to Russia's attitude toward the OSCE. The international community will have exponentially less ability to prevent renewed hostilities without access north of the boundaries. We should continue to make that access -- and a similar quest by the EU for that access -- a primary focus of our diplomatic efforts.

LOGSDON